

Having a barium swallow

This leaflet aims to answer your questions about having a barium swallow. It explains the benefits, risks and alternatives, as well as what you can expect when you come to hospital. If you have any further questions, please speak to a doctor or nurse caring for you.

What is a barium swallow?

A barium swallow is an examination of the oesophagus (food pipe) and the stomach. These areas of your body cannot normally be seen on x-ray images unless coated in a white liquid called barium contrast. The procedure is done by both:

- a radiologist (a doctor who uses x-rays to diagnose and treat illnesses); and
- a radiographer (a health professional that produces the images used to diagnose and treat illnesses).

The procedure uses a type of x-ray, called fluoroscopic imaging, to view images in real time. The images are taken as you swallow the liquid and as it passes into your stomach. The radiologist is able to check the oesophagus and stomach and see how well the liquid moves through them.

What happens during a barium swallow?

You will be asked to change into a hospital gown. You may also be asked to remove jewellery, dentures, glasses and any metal objects or clothing that might interfere with the x-ray images.

Please tell the radiologist of any medicines you are taking, severe allergies, recent illnesses or other medical conditions.

You will be asked to take mouthfuls of the liquid barium and to swallow this as the x-ray images are taken. The radiologist will take a series of x-ray images to watch the barium contrast pass through your oesophagus and into your stomach.

You may be repositioned often in order to get pictures of the oesophagus and stomach (upper digestive tract) from several angles. The x-ray equipment may also move in order to get the best possible pictures. The radiologist and radiographer will be there with you at all times to help you.

This examination is usually done within 20 minutes, but may take longer. You may need to wait a few minutes while the images are being checked to make sure we have all the necessary information.

Why should I have a barium swallow?

Your doctor has referred you for this examination to help make a diagnosis or help with your treatment plans. It may be a follow-up examination or you may be having symptoms.

What are the risks?

X-rays are of a type of radiation known as ionising radiation. The dose that you get from a medical x-ray is very low and the associated risks are minimal. The radiographer is responsible for making sure that your dose is kept as low as possible and that the benefits of having the examination outweigh any risk.

There are no risks associated with the barium liquid as it is not absorbed by the body. It only coats the walls of the oesophagus, stomach and bowel. For a small number of patients, there is a risk of aspiration (breathing in) of the contrast. This is unlikely but the risk increases for patients with known difficulties swallowing or a previous aspiration.

Female patients:

X-rays can be harmful for an unborn baby and should be avoided by women who are or may be pregnant. It is recommended that the examination is performed within 10 days of the first day of the onset of your menstrual period. If your appointment is not within this time or if you think you may be pregnant please contact the x-ray department.

Are there any alternatives?

There may be other alternative imaging available. However, this has been considered to be the most appropriate test for you. If you have any questions please speak to the doctor that referred you or with the radiologist on the day of your examination.

How can I prepare for the examination?

It is important that your stomach is empty for this examination. Please **do not eat or drink anything for three hours before your appointment.** If you need to, you can take small sips of water or clear fluid, but avoid drinking large amounts of fluid as this will dilute the contrast and make your examination less effective. You should continue to take your prescribed medicines, which you can take with a small amount of water or clear fluid. Please arrive on time for your appointment to help us give a prompt service to everyone.

If you have diabetes:

If you take tablets to control your diabetes, you should have a morning appointment. If you take insulin, your appointment should be at 9am. Please contact the x-ray department if this has not been done.

If you take tablets for your diabetes - miss your morning dose on the day of the examination. Bring your tablets and some food with you to take after the examination.

If you are on insulin - miss the morning dose of insulin on the day of your examination. You may need to reduce the previous evening's dose. Please bring your insulin and some food with you to take after the examination. If you take a long-acting insulin, do not stop taking it – speak to your diabetes team for advice.

Check your blood sugar regularly. If your blood sugar is below 4, then drink a small cup of sugary fluid, such as Lucozade, or have some boiled sweets.

Giving my consent (permission)

We want to involve you in decisions about your care and treatment. If you decide to go ahead, you will be asked to sign a consent form. This states that you agree to have the treatment and you understand what it involves.

If you would like more information about our consent process, please speak to a member of staff caring for you.

Will I feel any pain?

The examination should not be painful. If you are concerned please tell the radiologist or radiographer.

What happens after the barium swallow?

Some people feel a bit uncomfortable and bloated after barium studies. However, most people have little, if any, effects. Once you are happy to leave, you are free to do so.

What do I need to do after I go home?

You should restart your usual diet. The barium contrast may cause some constipation. To prevent this please drink plenty of fluids and eat plenty of fruit and vegetables (high in fibre). Some people find taking a mild laxative helps – these can be bought over the counter so please ask your local pharmacist for advice. The barium can often make your stools pale for a few days – this is normal.

What should I do if I have a problem?

If you feel unwell following the examination or have any concerns please contact your GP or the x-ray department.

Will I have a follow-up appointment?

The pictures taken during the examination are carefully studied by the radiologist, who will produce a detailed report. The results will be sent to the doctor who referred you for the test. They will discuss the results with you and any treatment you may need.

You should already have an appointment with the team who referred you. If not please contact them to arrange one to discuss the results of this test.

Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns about having a barium swallow, please contact the x-ray department on **020 7188 5490** (Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm).

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets

Pharmacy Medicines Helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.

t: 020 7188 8748 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

Your comments and concerns

For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). To make a complaint, contact the complaints department.

t: 020 7188 8801 (PALS) **e:** pals@gstt.nhs.uk

t: 020 7188 3514 (complaints) **e:** complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk

Language and Accessible Support Services

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch:

t: 020 7188 8815 **e:** languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk

NHS 111

Offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day.

t: 111

NHS Choices

Provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make choices about your health.

w: www.nhs.uk

Get involved and have your say: become a member of the Trust

Members of Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust contribute to the organisation on a voluntary basis. We count on them for feedback, local knowledge and support. Membership is free and it is up to you how much you get involved. To find out more, and to become a member:

t: 0800 731 0319 **e:** members@gstt.nhs.uk **w:** www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/membership

Leaflet number: 0588/VER2

Date published: October 2016

Review date: October 2019

© 2016 Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust